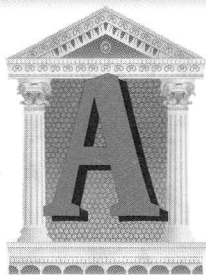


## 2 Athens



**Athenian Democracy** Athens was one of the largest of the Greek city-states and also one of the most democratic. Indeed, we remember it today as the birthplace of democracy.

Athenian democracy developed gradually over many decades, during which time monarchy had given way to aristocracy, aristocracy to oligarchy, and oligarchy to democracy. The Athenians also had to get rid of a few tyrants. Over the years more and more people won the right to participate in government. By 500 B.C. a recognizably democratic system was firmly established.

At the center of Athenian democracy was the Assembly. The Assembly passed laws, levied taxes, and voted on issues of war and peace. All Athenian citizens were allowed to participate in the Assembly. Before deciding on an issue, the members of the Assembly would debate the merits of the proposal. Then they would vote by holding up their hands. If a majority of those present supported the proposal, it would be accepted.

The Assembly also had the power to **ostracize**, or banish, citizens who might pose a danger to the polis. Again, this was done by voting. During ostracism votes each citizen was allowed to scratch another citizen's name on a piece of pottery called an *ostrakon*. If enough people scratched the same name, the ostracized citizen had to leave the city-state and stay away for ten years. However, he was allowed to keep his property, and at the end of ten years, he was allowed to return.

The Assembly was assisted by a smaller council, called the Boule (BOO lee), which was made up

of 500 members chosen by lot. Each member served a year-long term, and no citizen could serve more than two terms. The Boule decided which issues needed to be brought before the Assembly and which ones could be handled by other officials.

### vocabulary

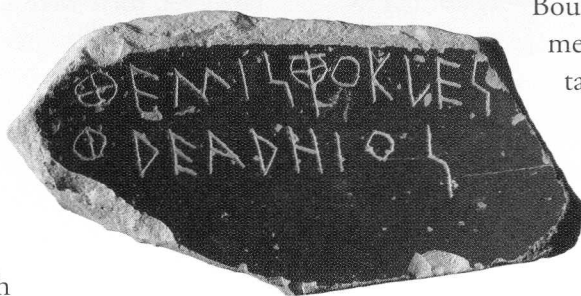
**ostracize** in ancient Athens, to banish or send away; nowadays it means "drive someone out of social life"

### The Legal System

The legal system was also quite democratic. Athenian law was divided into two sections. There were public laws, which had to do with the city-state, and private laws through which people could work out their disagreements. If someone broke a public law, he would have to pay a fine or face the penalty that had been decided upon by the Assembly or by the Boule. If someone had a disagreement with a neighbor, he could take his neighbor to a law court near the marketplace and have a jury decide his case.

Athenian juries were larger than ours are today. In some cases as many as 501 citizens sat on a single jury! The idea behind these giant juries was that they would be less

susceptible to bribery and corruption: it is easier to bribe a dozen jurors than it is to pay off several hundred. Because the juries were so big, nearly all citizens served on juries at some point in their lives.



*This ostrakon had the name "Themistocles" scratched on it.*



*Jury members voted by placing tokens in a jar. Solid hubs stood for "not guilty" and hollow hubs meant "guilty."*

The fourth element of Athenian democracy was a board of ten generals known as the *strategoí* (STRAT uh goi). These generals directed the army. They were elected each year by the Assembly.

### **Limits of Athenian Democracy**

It is important to understand that Athens was not completely democratic by modern standards. You read earlier that all Athenian citizens were allowed to participate in the Assembly. However, not everyone in the polis was a citizen. To qualify as a citizen, a person had to be (1) male, (2) at least 18 years of age, (3) not a slave, and (4) the son of two Athenian parents. Women, children, slaves, and foreigners living in Athens were not citizens and so could not vote in the Assembly or serve on juries.

Although Athenian women played an important role in religious affairs, they had virtually no political rights. They could not own property and were always under the control of a man, whether it was a husband or a male relative, such as a father, brother, or even a grown-up son. This male relative decided whom the woman would marry. If her husband died, she could be remarried without her consent. Sometimes, if a husband knew he was dying, he would decide before his death whom his wife should marry next! Women could not participate in debates in the Assembly and could not attend certain public events. Girls might receive some education at home, but they were not sent to school. Instead of participating in the political life of the polis, women were expected to bear children and tend to their families. The family was very important in ancient Athens, and Athenian women were expected to uphold it.

Athens was a busy trading city that opened its doors to many foreigners. These foreign residents, known as *metics* (MET ihks), played an important role in the Athenian economy. Many metics were artisans, craftsmen, or merchants. Although some metics were presented with honorary citizenship, most never became citizens.

Slaves had it even worse. They made up as much as a quarter or a third of the population. A rich citizen might have hundreds of slaves to run his household, farm, or business. A lesser household might have between 10 and 50 slaves. Only the poor did not depend on slave labor. Slaves cleaned, shopped, cooked, carried water, washed clothing, and helped raise children. Some slaves were educated, so they could help teach the children in a family. Others might be accomplished musicians who provided entertainment. But even the most talented slaves lacked political rights. Although Athenian slaves could sometimes earn enough money to buy their freedom, they could not purchase Athenian citizenship.

Once slaves, metics, women, and children are subtracted, only about 40,000 of the 300,000 or so people living in Athens and the surrounding countryside qualified as citizens. So Athenian democracy definitely had its limits. And yet we should not dismiss what the Athenians achieved. In 500 B.C. you could not find another place where so many of the people were involved in political affairs. Later societies would carry democratic ideals even further, but it was the Athenians who took the all-important first steps.



## Athenian Education

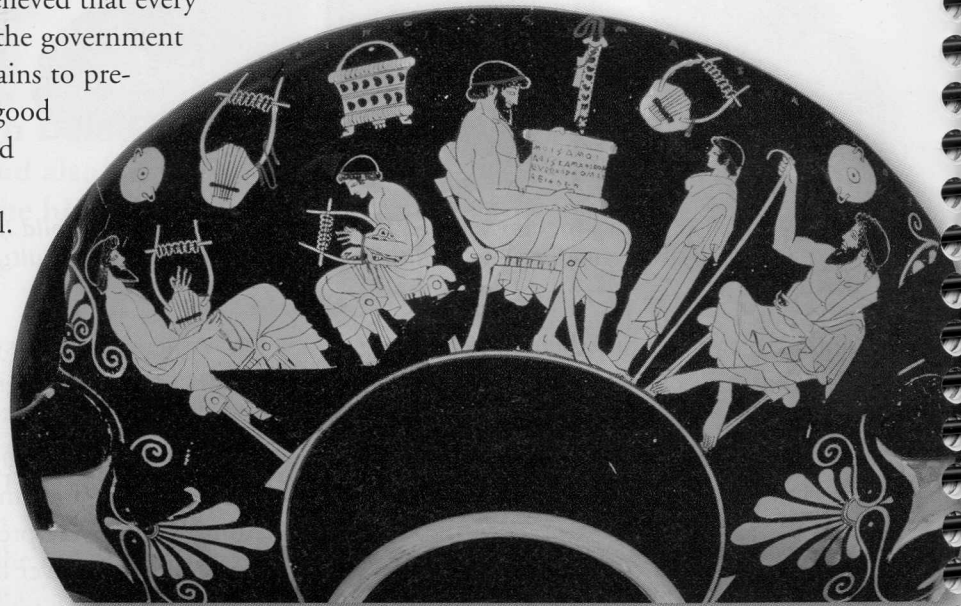
Because the Athenians believed that every citizen should play a role in the government of the city-state, they took pains to prepare young men to become good citizens. They believed a good education would benefit the polis as well as the individual.

A citizen would need to be able to take part in debates in the Assembly and law courts. He would also need to know how to argue, how to defend his own opinions, and how to criticize the ideas of others. This is why the Athenians taught their sons **rhetoric**.

Along with rhetoric, Athenian schools taught logic, reading, writing, arithmetic, and music. Boys learned to play a stringed instrument called the lyre and memorized sections from two **epic poems** attributed to the ancient Greek poet Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

In addition to academic instruction, every young man was given two years of military instruction and many years of physical education. Athenian men were expected to exercise in a gymnasium. This was not an enclosed building, like a modern gym, but a parklike area outside the city where men gathered in the cool shade of the trees to exercise their bodies and relax their minds. The men exercised in the nude. In fact, the word gymnasium comes from a Greek word meaning "to exercise naked."

When an Athenian male got a little older, he might begin to attend symposiums. The symposium was a banquet or drinking party. Citizens gathered to eat, drink, listen to musicians, converse, and enjoy one another's company. Much wine was consumed, but many symposiums also had an educational purpose. When the members of a symposium settled down for conversation, the men took turns speaking on a chosen theme,



*This painted vase depicts a classroom in ancient Greece. The figures on the left are playing the lyre.*

such as love or happiness. The participants were not just gossiping or wasting time. They were sharing wisdom and reaching conclusions.

Athenian education sought to produce loyal Athenian citizens, but it also sought to produce cultured, well-rounded men who appreciated art, music, and sports. The ideal citizen would be equally comfortable on the battlefield or in the Assembly. He would be willing to follow army discipline during wartime but also willing to drink wine and eat a hearty dinner at a symposium when the war was over.

He would fulfill his political responsibilities but also pursue other interests. In short the Athenian educational system was designed to produce solid citizens and well-rounded individuals.

### vocabulary

**rhetoric** the art of using language, especially to persuade others

**epic poem** a long poem that tells the story of the adventures of one or more legendary heroes